
MARINE CORPS HISTORICAL REFERENCE SERIES
Number 28

THE UNITED STATES MARINES
in the
GILBERTS CAMPAIGN



FILE COPY - DO NOT REMOVE

HISTORICAL BRANCH, G-3 DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U. S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Revised 1962



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

REVIEWED AND APPROVED 19 Jun 1962

C. A. Youngdale

C. A. YOUNGDALE
Brigadier General, U. S. Marine Corps
Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3

The United States Marines in the Gilberts Campaign

by

Bernard C. Nalty

The offensive against the Gilbert Islands marked the beginning of an American thrust to the heart of the Japanese empire. Operation GALVANIC, as the Gilberts venture was called, was undertaken to secure bases for future operations and to give added protection to the supply line from the United States to Australia. The units finally selected to attack the Gilberts were the 2d Marine Division and the 27th Infantry Division. The Marine division, made up of the 2d, 6th, and 8th Marines (infantry), 10th Marines (artillery), 18th Marines (engineers), 2d Tank Battalion, 2d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, plus headquarters and service units, was to storm Tarawa Atoll, while a reinforced regiment, the 165th Infantry, from the Army division captured Makin Atoll.

Early in August 1943, while the 2d Marine Division was in New Zealand recovering from the effects of the Guadalcanal campaign, its commanding general, Major General Julian C. Smith, was informed that his troops would strike at Tarawa sometime in November. Since the islands in this atoll were fringed by reefs, the general and his staff began experiments to determine the best means of crossing such obstacles. The LVT, an amphibian tractor, seemed the answer, so the division decided to use these vehicles to carry the assault troops.

On 2 October, less than six weeks before the target date for GALVANIC, General Julian Smith arrived at Pearl Harbor to discuss plans with Marine Major General Holland Smith, commanding general of the V Amphibious Corps to which the division was assigned, and the commanders of the task forces that had been formed for the operation. At this conference, General Julian Smith learned that his troops would have to seize heavily defended Betio Island before landing elsewhere in Tarawa atoll. If the Marines were permitted to occupy artillery positions on the lightly defended islands near Betio prior to the main attack, the enemy would be given additional time to employ his planes and submarines against the American task force. The division's commanding general also learned that one of his regiments, the 6th Marines, was to remain in corps reserve during the assault, leaving only two-thirds of his infantry strength under his direct control.

Working within these limitations, the general and his staff devised a plan for the assault on Betio. They decided to hurl three battalions against Red Beaches 1, 2, and 3 on the lagoon coast at the wider portion of the island. The assault unit would be Colonel David M. Shoup's 2d Marines, reinforced by a battalion from the 8th Marines and designated Combat Team 2. Colonel Shoup was to have one battalion in reserve, while the general withheld the remaining two battalions of the 8th Marines as the division reserve.

In spite of the successful experiments with LVT's, crossing the reef remained a difficult problem. The division had

only enough amphibian tractors for the first three assault waves, so the remaining troops would have to land from standard landing craft. If the water over the reef proved shallow, these boats would be stranded, forcing the Marines to wade ashore. Opinion was divided concerning the depth of water off the island, but one former resident of the Gilberts predicted erratic tides and shallow water.

Although Japanese strategists did not consider the Gilberts vital to the security of their empire, Betio nonetheless was heavily fortified. An estimated 4,836 Japanese troops and Korean laborers manned weapons ranging in size from 7.7mm machine guns to 8-inch coastal defense guns. Pillboxes, protected weapons emplacements, and bomb shelters had been built by Betio's defenders. Elsewhere in Tarawa Atoll, the enemy's defenses were weak. The major island in Makin Atoll was weakly held, in comparison to Betio, and Makin's other islands were not occupied. Few Japanese were on Apamama, the third objective of the operation.

The task force assigned to GALVANIC was commanded by Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, whose principal adviser on amphibious matters was General Holland Smith. Admiral Turner retained direct command over the forces attacking Makin, but he entrusted operations at Tarawa to Rear Admiral Harry W. Hill. Admiral Hill also had responsibility for the capture of Apamama Atoll, a task assigned to the V Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company.

At 0507 on the morning of 20 November 1943, the battleship USS Colorado opened fire in an attempt to silence Japanese shore

batteries. With brief interruptions, the naval bombardment continued until 0855. The total weight of explosives hurled into the island by supporting warships was approximately 3,000 tons. In addition, carrier aircraft delivered two strikes on the morning of D-Day.

H-Hour was originally set for 0830, but the LVT's proved slower than anticipated, and Admiral Hill twice revised the schedule. He finally designated 0900 as the hour when the assault waves would reach the island. Actually, the first elements of Colonel Shoup's command to reach the beaches arrived at 0910. Within 12 minutes, the first three waves of all three battalions had reached the shore.

Because the enemy had been dazed by the preliminary bombardment, he was unable to inflict many casualties on the troops being carried toward Betio in LVT's. The defenders, however, recovered in time to prevent the Marines from advancing far inland. Behind the amphibian tractors came landing craft carrying the remaining elements of the three battalions, their headquarters, and their supporting units. Since these boats drew too much water to cross the reef, the Marines they carried had to wade toward the beaches, easy victims to machine-gun bullets and shell fragments. The reef slowed the arrival of reserve units and prevented the prompt landing of medical supplies, water, and ammunition. Throughout the day, the Marines fought desperately to obtain a grip on the island.

In the central part of Betio, Colonel Shoup's reserve battalion joined two of his assault battalions in carving out a

beachhead less than 700 yards wide and no more than 400 yards deep. By the end of the day, half of the division reserve, tanks, and artillery had landed in this area, and a steady trickle of supplies was beginning to move inland. The position, nevertheless, was vulnerable to counterattack, for gaps existed through which the enemy could infiltrate, and few men were available to blunt penetrations of the line.

Isolated from the main beachhead, the third assault battalion had managed to overrun much of Betio's western coast. There were not enough Marines, however, to hold this expanded area, so the battalion shortened its lines. Darkness found the attackers with two separate footholds on Betio -- one at the island's northwestern tip and the other near its waist.

The enemy launched no counterattack that night, and on the morning of 21 November, the Marines resumed their offensive. The previous afternoon, after the 6th Marines had been released to his control, General Julian Smith had committed the remaining battalion of the 8th Marines. This unit reached the main beachhead on the morning of 21 November and began preparing to attack toward the west.

During the second day, some troops from the main beachhead fought their way across the airfield to establish a perimeter along the south coast, and others advanced a short distance westward. Meanwhile, the Marines who had withdrawn to the northwestern corner of the island cleared the enemy from the western end of Betio. The division's commanding general now decided to have a battalion of the 6th Marines attack from west to east, and by dark this additional unit was ashore.

Another battalion from the 6th Marines landed on Bairiki Island, just east of Betio, on the afternoon of 21 November. Strafing aircraft killed the few Japanese defenders as the assault troops were nearing the beach. By seizing Bairiki, the Marines blocked the enemy's avenue of retreat and gained a position from which artillery could support the operations of Betio.

Early on the morning of 22 November, the Marines on the central beachhead attacked both east and west. The enemy strongpoint at the eastern boundary was overwhelmed, but little ground was gained in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, the men of the 6th Marines who were already ashore on Betio attacked along the south coast, while another battalion from the same regiment landed behind them. By the end of the day, the coastal drive had carried beyond the airfield. That night, the enemy troops in the eastern part of the island delivered an unsuccessful counterattack.

The fourth day, 23 November, saw the crushing of organized resistance on Betio. The battalion of the 6th Marines that had landed the previous day drove to the eastern tip of the island, while elements of the 2d and 8th Marines wiped out the pocket of resistance located between the two original beachheads. On 24 November, a flag-raising was held on Betio, marking official capture of the island. As the Tarawa Atoll belonged to Great Britain before the Japanese seized it in 1941, the Marines courteously raised a British flag also.

The next tasks facing the division were the capture of Tarawa's other islands, accomplished by the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, against some scattered resistance, and the occupation of three nearby atolls, Abaiang, Maiana, and Marakei. Scouts of Company D, 2d Tank Battalion, investigating those atolls, found only innocent natives--except on Abaiang, where five lone Japanese escaped by boat.

About 100 miles northwest of the Tarawa Atoll, soldiers of the 165th Infantry captured Butaritari, the only Japanese-occupied island of the Makin Atoll. Just a few Marines, the 4th Platoon of the V Amphibious Corps Reconnaissance Company, were engaged here. The platoon's 20 Marines made an unopposed landing on Kotabu, a reef-fringed island at the entrance to Makin lagoon, and they later helped mop up Butaritari. Japanese opposition to the Army landings of 20 November on Butaritari was slight, but the inexperience of the troops--it was the regiment's first meeting with the enemy--resulted in slow progress and undue casualties.

The VAC Reconnaissance Company (less the 4th Platoon) was transported to Apamama Atoll, some 75 miles southeast of Tarawa, on board the submarine Nautilus and landed from rubber boats on the morning of 21 November. A Japanese patrol of three was encountered on one island, to their misfortune. On another island of the atoll, 18 of the 22 Japanese destroyed themselves after briefly turning their rifles and machine guns against the Marines approaching across a sandspit. The other four Japanese dead were found to be victims of naval gunfire. In the entire action at Apamama Atoll only one Marine was killed and one wounded.

Those lesser assaults of the Gilberts were not costly to the Marines, but the capture of Tarawa was extremely so. The battle for that atoll cost the 2d Marine Division 1,115 dead and 2,234 wounded. Of the entire enemy garrison, only 146 were taken prisoner; 4,690 chose to die rather than surrender.

In spite of the casualties, the operation was a success, for the Americans gained bases from which they could launch an attack into the Marshalls. Perhaps more important than the strategic advantage thus gained were the tactical lessons learned. In future landings, the assault troops would benefit from additional naval gunfire, better air support, and more heavily armored amphibian tractors. These improvements, which would save American lives, resulted from the experiences of the 2d Marine Division at Tarawa.

Marine gallantry at Tarawa made the battle among the most unforgettable of World War II. Time magazine, on 6 December 1943, expressed Tarawa's high place in American history:

Last week some two to three thousand U. S. Marines, most of them now dead or wounded, gave the nation a name to stand beside those of Concord Bridge, the Bonhomme Richard, the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and Belleau Wood. The name was Tarawa.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Philip A. Crowl and Edmund G. Love. Seizure of the Gilberts and Marshalls --- The U. S. Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific. Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1955. pp. 3-165.
- Jeter A. Isely and Philip A. Crowl. The U. S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951. pp. 192-252.
- Richard W. Johnston. Follow Me! The Story of The Second Marine Division in World War II. New York: Random House, 1948. pp. 99-156.
- Samuel Eliot Morison. The Aleutians, Gilberts, and Marshalls, June 1942 - April 1944 --- History of U. S. Naval Operations in World War II. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951. pp. 69-186, 336-342.
- Capt James R. Stockman, USMC. The Battle for Tarawa. Washington: Historical Section, Division of Public Information, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, 1947. iv, 86pp.